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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 001646

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: COLOMBIAN "PARAMILITARIES" IN VENEZUELA

Classified By: Ambassador Charles S. Shapiro for reasons
1.4 (a) and (b).

1. (C) The Chavez administration is beside itself that the Venezuelan public in general, the international community, and the media are reacting very skeptically to the allegations of a Colombian "paramilitary" threat to his government. On May 9, Chavez went on a national TV and radio hookup to reveal the alleged conspiracy against him, and on May 12 Chavez inaugurated the National Defense Council with an impassioned speech in which he charged that SouthCom Cdr GEN James Hill had foreknowledge of the invasion.⁸ Then Ambassador Jorge Valero denounced the invasion at the OAS, and chavista politicians are screaming themselves hoarse demanding that the Vatican, Colombia, the OAS, the United States, the Carter Center and anyone else with any credibility denounce the conspiracy.

2. (C) So far the facts are few. Over 100 men have been detained. The Colombian Embassy confirms that of the first 50 names supplied by the GOV all are Colombian citizens. They were recruited and moved to a farm southeast of Caracas. The Metropolitan Police and the El Hatillo municipal police say that in the early morning of May 9 they stopped two buses full of men in uniform and alerted the National Guard. The GOV claims the men were captured by a joint National Guard-DISIP-CICPC-DIM taskforce on a farm belonging to Cuban-Venezuelan Roberto Alonso. However detained, they were apparently housed on that farm. They were unarmed except for one individual with a pistol, and they were wearing Venezuelan Army camouflage uniforms.

3. (C) It is not known if these men are in fact paramilitaries. The Colombian Ambassador told me that none of the names match their database of known paramilitaries. The deputy director of DIM could provide emboff with no details beyond the fact they come from Colombia, s Norte de Santander Department. Asked which paramilitary front they belonged to, the DIM Deputy was stumped. Nonetheless, these people are not Boy Scouts on an outing. Our working hypothesis is that they are Colombian campesinos (not paramilitaries) recruited by someone. The question is who.

4. (C) I see four possibilities:

-- The chavista version is that there really is a well-organized USG-GOC conspiracy led by the Coordinadora Democratica and funded by major business and media leaders. VP Rangel told me on May 12 that they were planning to attack simultaneously the presidential palace (during an official dinner the night of May 12), the presidential residence, and an unnamed National Guard facility in Caracas. They were going to pick up their weapons on the way to the attack and had been training with sticks (!) at the farm where they were hidden. There are 1000 more "paramilitaries" around Venezuela, concentrated in the three states coincidentally controlled by the strongest opposition governors. This official version requires suspension of disbelief.

-- A group of radicals opposed to the government (perhaps within an organization called the Bloque Democrático) hired unemployed Colombian campesinos in an extraordinarily clumsy attempt to create enough disorder that a general uprising against Chavez would ensure. This is more plausible than the first scenario.

-- A variation is that the GOV knew of this plot through its penetrations and wiretaps of the opposition and let it develop to see whom they could smoke out. On two recent road trips, I was stopped at numerous National Guard and state police roadblocks. While I was passed through, buses were emptied of passengers who had to show identification to the police. It is hard to imagine that 100 Colombians of military age could pass through numerous roadblocks and travel hundreds of miles to a secret rendezvous, even in small groups.

-- A more malignant possibility is that the GOV organized this whole enterprise, that the Colombians were hired without knowing who the real organizers were and at least some radical anti-chavistas got caught up in the charade. Chavez claims that he knew about the April 2002 coup and went along in order to smoke out disloyal military officers and reveal

the true nature of the opposition.

Whether the GOV discovered the plot or facilitated it, there is also a possibility that the invasion will serve as the pretext for declaring a state of emergency and taking actions against the media.

15. (C) Whatever the truth is, Chavez is upset that people are not buying the official version which they are frantically flogging to discredit the opposition, overshadow the reparos, and prove US and Colombian threat to Venezuelan sovereignty.

16. (C) The hard-core Chavistas do not need any convincing. They believe whatever propaganda line the GOV is selling at any particular time. They believe not because they have been brainwashed by a totalitarian state, but because they wait to. The chavistas have suspended their disbelief.

17. (C) But the majority of Venezuelans and the international media and diplomatic community are skeptical. Chavez screamed that the Opposition committed mega-fraud during the petition drive. It is not so. Chavez claimed that the United States is planning to invade Venezuela. It is not so. Now Chavez claims hired Colombian paramilitaries have invaded Venezuela and is shocked that people don't believe him.

18. (C) What we need to do:

-- Keep our focus on reparos. The joint OAS/Carter Center statement on May 12 recaptured the headlines in the Venezuelan press.

-- Repeat our policy is enshrined in OAS Res. 833, while rejecting all extra-constitutional actions or use of force for political ends.

-- Reiterate our willingness, if requested, for US law enforcement to follow up on any information that leads to the US.

-- Reject the absurd charges of US involvement, but in a matter-of-fact manner that does not allow US-Venezuelan relations to overshadow the reparo.

-- Use this incident as a way to urge Colombia and Venezuela to increase cooperation against international terrorism against both the FARC and the paramilitaries.

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